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Item 28

State Department, Memorandum of Conversation, 22 Oct 62, sub: Meeting with Diefenbaker to deliver President Kennedy's letter on Cuban situation. (Filed by Ivan White, Charge d'affaires, US Embassy, Ottawa.)

State Dept. review completed.

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

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DATE: October 22, 1962  
5:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: Meeting with Prime Minister Diefenbaker to Deliver Copy of President Kennedy's Letter of October 22 on Cuban Situation.

PARTICIPANTS: Prime Minister Diefenbaker  
Howard Green, Secretary of State for External Affairs  
Douglas Harkness, Defense Minister  
Ambassador Livingston Merchant  
Ivan White, Charge d'affaires, American Embassy Ottawa

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The meeting was held at 5:00 p.m. on October 22 in the Cabinet Room adjoining the Prime Minister's office in the East Block. It lasted about an hour and a half. The Prime Minister had invited the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Howard Green, and Defense Minister Douglas Harkness to attend him. Mr. Robert Bryce, Secretary of the Cabinet, Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Norman Robertson, Chief of the Joint Staff Committee, Air Marshal Frank Miller and Mr. McCardle, Coordinator for Intelligence Matters in the Department of External Affairs waited in an anteroom throughout the meeting, but at no time were brought into the room. Ambassador Merchant was accompanied by Mr. Ivan White, Charge d'affaires.

At the outset, the Prime Minister appeared harassed and worried. Ambassador Merchant opened the conversation by saying that he had been personally dispatched by President Kennedy to inform the Prime Minister of certain extremely grave developments with respect to Cuba. The evidence was now conclusive that Cuba was in the process of being transformed into an offensive base under the Soviets. After a week of the most serious and secret deliberations, the President had decided upon a course of action which he would reveal in his televised speech at 7:00 p.m. to the American people.

The Ambassador went on to say that in light of the need for absolute secrecy, normal channels of communication could not be used and that

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because of his desire that the Prime Minister be informed at the earliest possible moment, it had been decided to send a personal emissary. Former Secretary of State Acheson had similarly been dispatched to Paris to inform General DeGaulle and the North Atlantic Council. Prime Minister Macmillan and two or three other heads of government among our Allies were being similarly and concurrently informed. The Ambassador concluded by saying that he had with him a draft of President Kennedy's speech which, of course, was still open to editorial changes and a personal letter from the President to the Prime Minister. He said that he had with him certain photographs which would reveal some of the evidence on which the President has reached his decision and he emphasized that the Soviet action had grave implications for the entire Western Hemisphere, including Canada, the entire free world since it represented the clandestine intrusion of nuclear weapons into the Western Hemisphere. Moreover, Mr. Kennedy's denial personally to the President the previous Thursday and Mr. Khrushchev's similar denial to Ambassador Kohler in Moscow a few days earlier that the Soviets were doing what it was now clear they were doing was subject to an ominous interpretation.

The Ambassador then handed the Prime Minister the President's message which he read hastily and passed to his two cabinet colleagues.

The Prime Minister then asked somewhat brusquely what were the main points of the President's speech. The Ambassador said that he thought the visual evidence might usefully be presented at this time, but the Prime Minister insisted. After briefly summarizing the main points of the speech, the Ambassador read the text of the speech aloud.

In various interruptions, the Prime Minister inquired whether the quarantine would include airplanes. He was told this was under continuing consideration and not excluded, but that it was not applicable under the terms of the President's speech. He then asked how the United States Government could invoke a quarantine before presenting the matter to the United Nations. The Ambassador replied that time was of the essence as the photographic evidence would show and that the United States in its own interest and that of the entire free world could not brook delay once the situation had been assessed by the President and a course of action decided.

The Prime Minister inquired what the attitude of the United Kingdom would be to the quarantine or blockade and the accompanying search of ships on the high seas in view of its traditional policy of freedom of the seas. Mr. Merchant answered that on the grounds of principle one could not expect the British to particularly like this form of action, but that he was satisfied more important considerations would be controlling in the British response to this threat.

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While Ambassador Merchant was reading the draft of the President's message, the Prime Minister expressed a strong reaction to the sentence in the speech which referred to the President's conversation with Gromyko the previous Thursday and in draft form read: "That statement also was dishonest and dishonorable". Mr. Diefenbaker said this language was unnecessary and provocative and was tantamount to the severance of diplomatic relations.

Defense Minister Harkness said that he took it that the implementation of the quarantine would involve the boarding of vessels. He inquired "what about submarines?". Mr. Harkness suggested that warheads could be brought in by this means.

Mr. Merchant replied that he had no specific knowledge as to the intended action against submarines, but that he confidently assumed that the U.S. Navy was competent to deal effectively with any possible transport of nuclear warheads by sea. [ ] pointed out that the approaches to all Cuban harbors capable of receiving such cargo was so shallow as to make it a reasonable assumption that submarines could be intercepted on the surface.

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External Affairs Minister Green referred to the President's statements of September 4 and 13 and observed that we were now jumping from one position to another. He inquired why the change was so rapid. Mr. Green also inquired as to how we knew that there were so many strategic missiles in Cuba.

Ambassador Merchant said that the President's speech in relation to his earlier statements in September reflected a momentous change in the position and that Mr. Green's questions would be answered when he studied the photographs.

At this point a background intelligence briefing was given, including visual presentation. The Prime Minister wanted to know when the earliest "ground report" of strategic missiles in Cuba had been received. The nature, timing, etc. of various refugee and agents' reports was explained to him. The Prime Minister scrutinized all of the photographs, with special reference to the dates when they had been taken, and inquired whether we had any photographs before October 15 of the missile bases. Mr. Green raised the question and was answered as to which bases had 1000 nautical mile range missiles and which ones had 2000 mile missiles. The Prime Minister asked if the United States planned to stop the suspected missile ship, Poltava. He was given an affirmative answer. Mr. Harkness inquired whether the vessels would be boarded forcibly. He was told the quarantine would be effective whether or not it encountered resistance.

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At this point the Prime Minister reverted to the language in the draft characterizing Gromyko's statement and said that it was a provocation to war after 24 hours. The Prime Minister then said Canada was prohibiting overflights of Soviet planes but there was a legal question in connection with Czech and Polish planes because of the fact that they were members of the ICAO Convention. Mr. Green confirmed this.

The Prime Minister then commented that with the speech there would be panic and inquired what is the reaction to the speech going to be. The Ambassador replied that there was not the slightest doubt in his mind that the reaction of the American people to the President's speech would be calm and resolute. The Prime Minister then added he didn't like the words "dishonest and dishonorable". Gromyko was in much the same position as the two Japanese before Pearl Harbor. The Prime Minister went on to inquire why the President had not confronted Gromyko with the evidence of the missile bases on the occasion of the Thursday meeting. Green commented that Gromyko may not have known.

Ambassador Merchant said that naturally he could not say exactly what was in the President's mind in not facing Gromyko with the evidence, but that it should be borne in mind that the evidence was accumulating photographically from day to day and that it was his impression that the evidence was not considered incontrovertible, until the following day or even two days after Gromyko's call. He also pointed out that the President had been in communication with Khrushchev and that a further message had been sent to Khrushchev this very day.

Mr. Diefenbaker, after inquiring as to when the President's message was delivered to Khrushchev and after commenting that he was himself a politician, said "let us face facts; an election is on in the United States"; that he could understand that the President might find his speech to be politically helpful but that the quarantine was dangerous and a threat to Allies of the United States. The United States was not only informing the Soviet Union of what it knew, it was challenging the Soviet Union. The Ambassador said that it was unthinkable and inconceivable that the President was influenced in any way by domestic political considerations. Mr. Diefenbaker whose attitude during the discussion and following the photographs had been gradually changing, at this point seemed to have swung around from his original skepticism bordering on antagonism to a more considered, friendly and cooperative manner. Reflective of this, the Prime Minister then said that the President's speech on the whole was temperate, except for the statement characterizing Gromyko which he considered provocative. These words were ill-timed and they shocked him.

Mr. Merchant said that he would urgently communicate to the White House the Prime Minister's reaction to this phrase as soon as he returned to the Embassy.

Mr. Green

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Mr. Green inquired why the United States did not go to the Security Council first; he understood that the American people had to be informed, but why not the Security Council before taking action on a blockade.

The Ambassador said that in light of the seriousness of the development and its suddenness, the President owed his first duty to the American people.

Mr. Harkness inquired as to the reaction of the American people to the speech; would they not demand an invasion. The Ambassador said that he had not the slightest doubt that the American people would wholeheartedly support and follow the President, and he said he foresaw no possibility of the President being placed under or succumb to public pressures to go beyond what he felt was right.

The Prime Minister observed that we were moving into a highly emotional period, and said it wasn't clear to him how the blockade would remove the threat of the missiles already in Cuba; that you would live in constant fear if those already there remained. Green thought it would be no problem to get inspectors for at-site inspection. Harkness inquired "when?". Mr. Harkness thought that a general war would be less likely with an invasion of Cuba than with a blockade stopping Soviet ships. In general discussion, replies were given at length to these and certain other questions which were raised.

The Prime Minister commented that the speech would arouse the American people. He asked Ambassador Merchant to communicate the thing to the President for him: "the two words dishonest and dishonorable were most challenging and provocative. They should come out." This was the only thing in the President's address to which he objected. Mr. Green added that without these words the onus would be on Gromyko.

The meeting then began to break up and at its conclusion, Ambassador Merchant was under the impression that Mr. Green has been less shocked and less vocal than would be expected; that Mr. Harkness was cheered by the decisiveness of the President's course of action and fully supported it; and that the Prime Minister was sobered and upset but that his earlier doubts had been dissipated and in the end he would give strong support to the United States. It was interesting, however, that at no point, despite pointed questions, did he make a commitment in this regard.

The Prime Minister expressed his appreciation for Ambassador Merchant's special trip [redacted]

[redacted] It was arranged that those waiting in the anteroom would be given an intelligence briefing. The Prime Minister was also told that whereas Ambassador Merchant's mission was secret up until the time when the President spoke, there was no need thereafter to hide it and that the Prime Minister was at liberty to publicize it if he thought it would be helpful to reveal this method of communication.

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